

JANE AUSTEN.

A NEW EDITION OF HER NOVELS.

JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS. A new edition. Hodder & Brothers, Boston.

The enterprise and taste displayed by the Boston publishers who are now issuing this handsome and convenient edition of the novels of Jane Austen, correspond, it may be hoped, to the public demand for such a resurrection of the writings of an author upon whose work, after a brief period of appreciation, oblivion seemed, not long ago, to have fallen. It cannot be said of Jane Austen that she lacked hearty recognition on the part of authoritative critics. Of these it is enough to name Sir Walter Scott and Macaulay. Yet how many remember the terms used by these great authors in writing of her. Sir Walter's honest admiration took the form of a self-dedication which, however honest, few will subscribe to. "Miss Austen," he said, "had a talent for describing the movements and feelings and characters of ordinary life, which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The big 'how-wow' strain I can do myself, like any one now going; but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting, from the truth of the description and the sentiment, is denied to me." Scott here puts his finger at once upon one of the distinguishing excellencies of Jane Austen's work, and Macaulay, as will be seen, goes straight to the heart of her genius.

"She has," he says, "given us a multitude of characters, all, in a certain sense, commonplace, all such as we meet every day. Yet they are all as perfectly discriminated from each other as if they were the most eccentric of human beings. There are, for instance, four clergymen, none of whom we should be surprised to find in any parsonage in the Kingdom. Mr. Edward Ferrars, Mr. Henry Tilney, Mr. Edward Bertram, and Mr. Elton. They are all specimens of the upper part of the middle class. They have all been liberally educated. They all be under the restraints of the same sacred profession. They are all young. They are all in love. Not one of them has any hobby-horse, to use the phrase of Sterne. Not one has a ruling passion, such as we read of in Pope. Who would not have expected them to be insipid like noses of each other?" No such thing! Harpagon is not more unlike to Jourdain. Joseph Surface is not more unlike to Sir Lucius O'Trigger than every one of Miss Austen's young divines to all his reverend brethren. And almost all this is done by touches so delicate, that they elude analysis, that they defy the powers of description, and that we know them to exist only by the general effect to which they have contributed."

Macaulay has been accused of praising Miss Austen's novels to excess. Perhaps he did. They are not for all tastes. One can easily understand what impatience of their conventionality the passionate author of "Jane Eyre" regarded them. After reading "Pride and Prejudice" she wrote her impressions to George Henry Lewes, saying, "And what did I find? An accurate daguerreotype portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully fanned, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright vivacious physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen in their elegance, but confined houses." That may well be believed.

For the passion of Charlotte Bronte's genius drove her to scenes as remote as possible from those described by Jane Austen, who characterized her own novels as "a little bit of ivory two inches wide," upon which she "worked with a brush so fine as to produce little effect after much labor." This does not do justice to her work, but it indicates in part the method which she employed.

As an illustration of this method let us take a few lines almost haphazard from her novel, "Park Lane." She is describing the message of Mrs. Price, mother of her heroine, Fanny. The latter had been absent for years, having been adopted and educated by richer relatives. She is disappointed on returning home: "Mrs. Price was not unkind; but instead of gaining on her affection and confidence, and becoming more dear, her daughter never met with greater kindness from her than on the first day of her arrival. The instinct of nature was soon satisfied, and Mrs. Price's attachment had no other source; she had neither leisure nor affection to bestow upon Fanny. Her daughters never had been much to her. She was fond of her sons, especially of William; but Fanny was the first of her girls whom she had ever much regarded. To her she was most injuriously indulgent. William was her pride, Fanny her darling; and John, Richard, Sam, Tom and Charles occupied all the rest of her maternal solicitude, alternately her worries and her comforts. These shared her heart; her time was given wholly to her house and her servants. Her days were spent in a kind of slow bustle; all was busy without getting on, always being hindmost and last; without altering her ways; wishing to be an economist, without contrivance or regularity; dissatisfied with her servants, without skill to make them better, and whether helping or remonstrating or indulging them, without any power of engaging their respect."

There is an etching, every line and point of which is clearly and firmly bitten in. A few sentences, precise and sharp, and we have the woman and her household before us in the distinctest, most efficient portraiture. Now this may help to illustrate the most conspicuous charm and merit of her work. True, her characters and the scenes in which they move are as a rule commonplace. But this is a necessity arising out of the author's environment. Let it be admitted that her imagination was confined; that she was not a creator, but an observer; that she could only describe that which she had seen and heard and known; the middle-class English society furnishing the whole of her experience, she was restricted to that field. None of these considerations in the least militate against the reality of her transcendental skill and power. For it is a light and easy task to delineate vividly and truthfully the simplest, most everyday scenes and characters! If it is, how comes it to pass that so few novelists have succeeded in it? And is it a little thing to inform such commonplace people and ways of life with interest?

Jane Austen has made her novels interesting by filling them with living souls, and not marionettes; by putting before us consistent, natural and intelligible characters, each, as Macaulay says, clearly discriminated from the other. It is by no means always in real life that such discrimination is capable of being effected by the average observer. Just as, to those not acquainted with them, all Chinamen look alike, and all sheep in a flock look alike, so to the dull looker-on upon human society there are whole groups of classes of men and women who appear to run in the same mould as to their characters; but a finer and keener insight distinguishes these positively and clearly, and this finer and keener insight is Jane Austen's. It would be easy to make too much of what has been said concerning the commonplace character of her people and their doings, and it needs to be pointed out that her realism is in many respects quite different from that modern form which grows in the gutter for its types, or takes them from phenomenal representatives of dulness and stupidity. If Jane Austen's novels are to be regarded as a Seer, her revelations suggest nothing of artifice. Her knowledge of character is intuitive, not the result of microscopic analysis. This lends a freshness to her writings the absence of which in fiction nothing can compensate. In short, this author of the eighteenth instead of the nineteenth "in de stele" possesses talents and skill sufficient to teach modesty to many of the writers of our own time who look with unseemly disdain upon the past, and flatter themselves that they have created a "finer art" and a superior fiction.

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